English literature

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English literature, the body of written works produced in the English language by inhabitants of the British Isles (including Ireland) from the 7th century to the present day. The major literatures written in English outside the British Isles are treated separately under American literature, Australian literature, Canadian literature, and New Zealand literature.

English literature has sometimes been stigmatized as insular. It can be argued that no single English novel attains the universality of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or the French writer Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Yet in the Middle Ages the Old English literature of the subjugated Saxons was leavened by the Latin and Anglo-Norman writings, eminently foreign in origin, in which the churchmen and the Norman conquerors expressed themselves. From this combination emerged a flexible and subtle linguistic instrument exploited by Geoffrey Chaucer and brought to supreme application by William Shakespeare. During the Renaissance the renewed interest in Classical learning and values had an important effect on English literature, as on all the arts; and ideas of Augustan literary propriety in the 18th century and reverence in the 19th century for a less specific, though still selectively viewed, Classical antiquity continued to shape the literature. All three of these impulses derived from a foreign source, namely the Mediterranean basin. The Decadents of the late 19th century and the Modernists of the early 20th looked to continental European individuals and movements for inspiration. Nor was attraction toward European intellectualism dead in the late 20th century, for by the mid-1980s the approach known as structuralism, a phenomenon predominantly French and German in origin, infused the very study of English literature itself in a host of published critical studies and university departments. Additional influence was exercised by deconstructionist analysis, based largely on the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Further, Britain's past imperial activities around the globe continued to inspire literature—in some cases wistful, in other cases hostile. Finally, English literature has enjoyed a certain diffusion abroad, not only in predominantly English-speaking countries but also in all those others where English is the first choice of study as a second language.

English literature is therefore not so much insular as detached from the continental European tradition across the Channel. It is strong in all the conventional categories of the bookseller's list: in Shakespeare it has a dramatist of world renown; in poetry, a genre notoriously resistant to adequate translation and therefore difficult to compare with the poetry of other literatures, it is so peculiarly rich as to merit inclusion in the front rank; English literature's humor has been found as hard to convey to foreigners as poetry, if not more so—a fact at any rate permitting bestowal of the label “idiosyncratic”; English literature’s remarkable body of travel writings constitutes another counterthrust to the charge of insularity; in autobiography, biography, and historical writing, English literature compares with the best of any culture; and children’s literature, fantasy, essays, and journals, which tend to be considered minor genres, are all fields of exceptional achievement as regards English literature. Even in philosophical writings, popularly thought of as hard to combine with literary value, thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, and Bertrand Russell stand comparison for lucidity and grace with the best of the French philosophers and the masters of Classical antiquity.

Some of English literature’s most distinguished practitioners in the 20th century—from Joseph Conrad at its beginning to V.S. Naipaul and Tom Stoppard at its end—were born outside the British Isles. What is more, none of the aforementioned had as much in common with his adoptive country as did, for instance, Doris Lessing and Peter Porter (two other distinguished writer-immigrants to Britain), both having been born into a British family and having been brought up on British Commonwealth soil.

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Poetry: First Lines

On the other hand, during the same period in the 20th century, many notable practitioners of English literature left the British Isles to live abroad: James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Robert Graves, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, and Anthony Burgess. In one case, that of Samuel Beckett, this process was carried to the extent of writing works first in French and then translating them into English.

Even English literature considered purely as a product of the British Isles is extraordinarily heterogeneous, however. Literature actually written in those Celtic tongues once prevalent in Cornwall, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales—called the “Celtic Fringe”—is treated separately (*see* Celtic literature). Yet Irish, Scots, and Welsh writers have contributed enormously to English literature even when they have written in dialect, as the 18th-century poet Robert Burns and the 20th-century Scots writer Alasdair Gray have done. In the latter half of the 20th century, interest began also to focus on writings in English or English dialect by recent settlers in Britain, such as Afro-Caribbeans and people from Africa proper, the Indian subcontinent, and East Asia.

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Even within England, culturally and historically the dominant partner in the union of territories comprising Britain, literature has been as enriched by strongly provincial writers as by metropolitan ones. Another contrast more fruitful than not for English letters has been that between social milieus, however much observers of Britain in their own writings may have deplored the survival of class distinctions. As far back as medieval times, a courtly tradition in literature cross-fertilized with an earthier demotic one. Shakespeare’s frequent juxtaposition of royalty in one scene with plebeians in the next reflects a very British way of looking at society. This awareness of differences between high life and low, a state of affairs fertile in creative tensions, is observable throughout the history of English literature.

The Old English period

Poetry

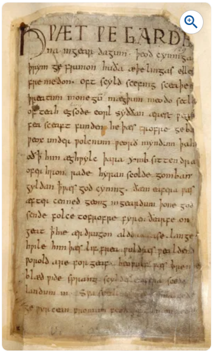
The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who invaded Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries brought with them the common Germanic meter; but of their earliest oral poetry, probably used for panegyric, magic, and short narrative, little or none survives. For nearly a century after the conversion of King Aethelberht I of Kent to Christianity about 600, there is no evidence that the English wrote poetry in their own language. But St. Bede the Venerable, in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (“Ecclesiastical History of the English People”), wrote that in the late 7th century Caedmon, an illiterate Northumbrian cowherd, was inspired in a dream to compose a short hymn in praise of the creation. Caedmon later composed verses based on Scripture, which was expounded for him by monks at Streaneshalch (now called Whitby), but only the “Hymn of Creation” survives. Caedmon legitimized the native verse form by adapting it to Christian themes. Others, following his example, gave England a body of vernacular poetry unparalleled in Europe before the end of the 1st millennium.

Alliterative verse

Virtually all Old English poetry is written in a single meter, a four-stress line with a syntactical break, or caesura, between the second and third stresses, and with alliteration linking the two halves of the line; this pattern is occasionally varied by six-stress lines. The poetry is formulaic, drawing on a common set of stock phrases and phrase patterns, applying standard epithets to various classes of characters, and depicting scenery with such recurring images as the eagle and the wolf, which wait during battles to feast on carrion, and ice and snow, which appear in the landscape to signal sorrow. In the best poems such formulas, far from being tedious, give a strong impression of the richness of the cultural fund from which poets could draw. Other standard devices of this poetry are the kenning, a figurative name for a thing, usually expressed in a compound noun (e.g., *swan-road* used to name the sea); and variation, the repeating of a single idea in different words, with each repetition adding a new level of meaning. That these verse techniques changed little during 400 years of literary production suggests the extreme conservatism of Anglo-Saxon culture.

The major manuscripts

Most Old English poetry is preserved in four manuscripts of the late 10th and early 11th centuries. The Beowulf manuscript (British Library) contains *Beowulf*, *Judith*, and three prose tracts; the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral) is a miscellaneous gathering of lyrics, riddles, didactic poems, and religious narratives; the Junius Manuscript (Bodleian Library, Oxford)—also called the Caedmon Manuscript, even though its contents are no longer attributed to Caedmon—contains biblical paraphrases; and the Vercelli Book (found in the cathedral library in Vercelli, Italy) contains saints’ lives, several short religious poems, and prose homilies. In addition to the poems in these books are historical poems in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; poetic renderings of Psalms 51–150; the 31 “Metres” included in King Alfred the Great’s translation of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*); magical, didactic, elegiac, and heroic poems; and others, miscellaneously interspersed with prose, jotted in margins, and even worked in stone or metal.



Beowulf Beginning of the Beowulf manuscript.

Problems of dating

Few poems can be dated as closely as Caedmon’s “Hymn.” King Alfred’s compositions fall into the late 9th century, and Bede composed his “Death Song” within 50 days of his death on May 25, 735. Historical poems such as “The Battle of Brunanburh” (after 937) and “The Battle of Maldon” (after 991) are fixed by the dates of the events they commemorate. A translation of one of Aldhelm’s riddles is found not only in the Exeter Book but also in an early 9th-century manuscript at Leiden, Neth. And at least a part of “The Dream of the Rood” can be dated by an excerpt carved on the 8th-century Ruthwell Cross (in Dumfriesshire, Scot.). But in the absence of such indications, Old English poems are hard to date, and the scholarly consensus that most were composed in the Midlands and the North in the 8th and 9th centuries gave way to uncertainty during the last two decades of the 20th century. Many now hold that “The Wanderer,” *Beowulf*, and other poems once assumed to have been written in the 8th century are of the 9th century or later. For most poems, there is no scholarly consensus beyond the belief that they were written between the 8th and the 11th centuries.

Religious verse

If few poems can be dated accurately, still fewer can be attributed to particular poets. The most important author from whom a considerable body of work survives is Cynewulf, who wove his runic signature into the epilogues of four poems. Aside from his name, little is known of him; he probably lived in the 9th century in Mercia or Northumbria. His works include *The Fates of the Apostles*, a short martyrology; *The Ascension* (also called *Christ II*), a homily and biblical narrative; *Juliana*, a saint's passion set in the reign of the Roman emperor Maximian (late 3rd century CE); and *Elene*, perhaps the best of his poems, which describes the mission of St. Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine, to recover Christ's cross. Cynewulf's work is lucid and technically elegant; his theme is the continuing evangelical mission from the time of Christ to the triumph of Christianity under Constantine. Several poems not by Cynewulf are associated with him because of their subject matter. These include two lives of St. Guthlac and *Andreas*; the latter, the apocryphal story of how St. Andrew fell into the hands of the cannibalistic (and presumably mythical) Mermedonians, has stylistic affinities with *Beowulf*. Also in the "Cynewulf group" are several poems with Christ as their subject, of which the most important is "The Dream of the Rood," in which the cross speaks of itself as Christ's loyal thane and yet the instrument of his death. This tragic paradox echoes a recurring theme of secular poetry and at the same time movingly expresses the religious paradoxes of Christ's triumph in death and humankind's redemption from sin.

Several poems of the Junius Manuscript are based on the Old Testament narratives Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel. Of these, *Exodus* is remarkable for its intricate diction and bold imagery. The fragmentary *Judith* of the Beowulf Manuscript stirringly embellishes the story from the Apocrypha of the heroine who led the Jews to victory over the Assyrians.

Elegiac and heroic verse

The term *elegy* is used of Old English poems that lament the loss of worldly goods, glory, or human companionship. "The Wanderer" is narrated by a man, deprived of lord and kinsmen, whose journeys lead him to the realization that there is stability only in heaven. "The Seafarer" is similar, but its journey motif more explicitly symbolizes the speaker's spiritual yearnings. Several others have similar themes, and three elegies—"The Husband's Message," "The Wife's Lament," and "Wulf and Eadwacer"—describe what appears to be a conventional situation: the separation of husband and wife by the husband's exile.

"Deor" bridges the gap between the elegy and the heroic poem, for in it a poet laments the loss of his position at court by alluding to sorrowful stories from Germanic legend. *Beowulf* itself narrates the battles of Beowulf, a prince of the Geats (a tribe in what is now southern Sweden), against the monstrous Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. The account contains some of the best elegiac verse in the language, and, by setting marvelous tales against a historical background in which victory is always temporary and strife is always renewed, the poet gives the whole an elegiac cast. *Beowulf* also is one of the best religious poems, not only because of its explicitly Christian passages but also because Beowulf's monstrous foes are depicted as God's enemies and Beowulf himself as God's champion. Other heroic narratives are fragmentary. Of "The Battle of Finnsburh" and "Waldere" only enough remains to indicate that, when whole, they must have been fast-paced and stirring.

Of several poems dealing with English history and preserved in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the most notable is "The Battle of Brunanburh," a panegyric on the occasion of King Athelstan's victory over a coalition of Norsemen and Scots in 937. But the best historical poem is not from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. "The Battle of Maldon," which describes the defeat of Aldorman Byrhtnoth and much of his army at the hands of Viking invaders in 991, discovers in defeat an occasion to celebrate the heroic ideal, contrasting the determination of many of Byrhtnoth's thanes to avenge his death or die in the attempt with the cowardice of others who left the field. Minor poetic genres include catalogs (two sets of "Maxims" and "Widsith," a list of rulers, tribes, and notables in the heroic age), dialogues, metrical prefaces and epilogues to prose works of the Alfredian period, and liturgical poems associated with the Benedictine Office.

Prose

The earliest English prose work, the law code of King Aethelberht I of Kent, was written within a few years of the arrival in England (597) of St. Augustine of Canterbury. Other 7th- and 8th-century prose, similarly practical in character, includes more laws, wills, and charters. According to Cuthbert, who was a monk at Jarrow, Bede at the time of his death had just finished a translation of the Gospel of St. John, though this does not survive. Two medical tracts, *Herbarium* and *Medicina de quadrupedibus*, very likely date from the 8th century.

Early translations into English

The earliest literary prose dates from the late 9th century, when King Alfred, eager to improve the state of English learning, led a vigorous program to translate into English “certain books that are necessary for all men to know.” Alfred himself translated the *Pastoral Care* of St. Gregory I the Great, the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, the *Soliloquies* of St. Augustine of Hippo, and the first 50 Psalms. His *Pastoral Care* is a fairly literal translation, but his Boethius is extensively restructured and revised to make explicit the Christian message that medieval commentators saw in that work. He revised the *Soliloquies* even more radically, departing from his source to draw from Gregory and St. Jerome, as well as from other works by Augustine. Alfred’s prefaces to these works are of great historical interest.

At Alfred’s urging, Bishop Werferth of Worcester translated the *Dialogues* of Gregory; probably Alfred also inspired anonymous scholars to translate Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* and Paulus Orosius’s *Historiarum adversum paganos libri vii* (*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*). Both of these works are much abridged; the Bede translation follows its source slavishly, but the translator of Orosius added many details of northern European geography and also accounts of the voyages of Ohthere the Norwegian and Wulfstan the Dane. These accounts, in addition to their geographical interest, show that friendly commerce between England and Scandinavia was possible even during the Danish wars. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle probably originated in Alfred’s reign. Its earliest annals (beginning in the reign of Julius Caesar) are laconic, except the entry for 755, which records in detail a feud between the West Saxon king Cynewulf and the would-be usurper Cyneheard. The entries covering the Danish wars of the late 9th century are much fuller, and those running from the reign of Ethelred II to the Norman Conquest in 1066 (when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle exists in several versions) contain many passages of excellent writing. The early 10th century is not notable for literary production, but some of the homilies in the Vercelli Book and the Blickling Manuscript (Scheide Library, Princeton University) may belong to that period.

Late 10th- and 11th-century prose

The prose literature of the mid- to late 10th century is associated with the Benedictine Reform, a movement that sought to impose order and discipline on a monastic establishment that was thought to have grown lax. Aethelwold, bishop of Winchester and one of the leaders of the reform, translated the Rule of St. Benedict. But the greatest and most prolific writer of this period was his pupil Aelfric, a monk at Cerne and later abbot of Eynsham, whose works include three cycles of 40 homilies each (*Catholic Homilies*, 2 vol., and the *Lives of the Saints*), as well as homilies not in these cycles; a Latin grammar; a treatise on time and natural history; pastoral letters; and several translations. His Latin *Colloquy*, supplied with an Old English version by an anonymous glossarist, gives a fascinating glimpse into the Anglo-Saxon monastic classroom. Aelfric wrote with lucidity and astonishing beauty, using the rhetorical devices of Latin literature frequently but without ostentation; his later alliterative prose, which loosely imitates the rhythms of Old English poetry, influenced writers long after the Norman Conquest. Wulfstan, archbishop of York, wrote legal codes, both civil and ecclesiastical, and a number of homilies, including *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (“Wulf’s Address to the English”), a ferocious denunciation of the morals of his time. To judge from the number of extant manuscripts, these two writers were enormously popular. Byrhtferth of Ramsey wrote several Latin works and the *Enchiridion*, a textbook on the calendar, notable for its ornate style. Numerous anonymous works, some of very high quality, were produced in this period, including homilies, saints’ lives, dialogues, and translations of such works as the Gospels, several Old Testament books, liturgical texts, monastic rules, penitential handbooks, and the romance *Apollonius of Tyre* (translated from Latin but probably derived from a Greek original). The works of the Benedictine Reform were written during a few remarkable decades around the turn of the millennium. Little original work can be securely dated to the period after Wulfstan's death (1023), but the continued vigor of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle shows that good Old English prose was written right up to the Norman Conquest. By the end of this period, English had been established as a literary language with a polish and versatility unequaled among European vernaculars.

The early Middle English period

Poetry

The Norman Conquest worked no immediate transformation on either the language or the literature of the English. Older poetry continued to be copied during the last half of the 11th century; two poems of the early 12th century—"Durham," which praises that city's cathedral and its relics, and "Instructions for Christians," a didactic piece—show that correct alliterative verse could be composed well after 1066. But even before the conquest, rhyme had begun to supplant rather than supplement alliteration in some poems, which continued to use the older four-stress line, although their rhythms varied from the set types used in classical Old English verse. A postconquest example is "The Grave," which contains several rhyming lines; a poem from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle on the death of William the Conqueror, lamenting his cruelty and greed, has more rhyme than alliteration.

Influence of French poetry

By the end of the 12th century, English poetry had been so heavily influenced by French models that such a work as the long epic *Brut* (c. 1200) by Lawamon, a Worcestershire priest, seems archaic for mixing alliterative lines with rhyming couplets while generally eschewing French vocabulary. The *Brut* draws mainly upon Wace's Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut* (1155; based in turn upon Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* [*History of the Kings of Britain*]), but in Lawamon's hands the Arthurian story takes on a Germanic and heroic flavor largely missing in Wace. The *Brut* exists in two manuscripts, one written shortly after 1200 and the other some 50 years later. That the later version has been extensively modernized and somewhat abridged suggests the speed with which English language and literary tastes were changing in this period. *The Proverbs of Alfred* was written somewhat earlier, in the late 12th century; these proverbs deliver conventional wisdom in a mixture of rhymed couplets and alliterative lines, and it is hardly likely that any of the material they contain actually originated with the king whose wisdom they celebrate. The early 13th-century *Bestiary* mixes alliterative lines, three- and four-stress couplets, and septenary (heptameter) lines, but the logic behind this mix is more obvious than in the *Brut* and the *Proverbs*, for the poet was imitating the varied meters of his Latin source. More regular in form than these poems is the anonymous *Poema morale* in septenary couplets, in which an old man delivers a dose of moral advice to his presumably younger audience.

By far the most brilliant poem of this period is *The Owl and the Nightingale* (written after 1189), an example of the popular debate genre. The two birds argue topics ranging from their hygienic habits, looks, and songs to marriage, prognostication, and the proper modes of worship. The nightingale stands for the joyous aspects of life, the owl for the somber; there is no clear winner, but the debate ends as the birds go off to state their cases to one Nicholas of Guildford, a wise man. The poem is learned in the clerical tradition but wears its learning lightly as the disputants speak in colloquial and sometimes earthy language. Like the *Poema morale*, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is metrically regular (octosyllabic couplets), but it uses the French meter with an assurance unusual in so early a poem.

Didactic poetry

The 13th century saw a rise in the popularity of long didactic poems presenting biblical narrative, saints' lives, or moral instruction for those untutored in Latin or French. The most idiosyncratic of these is the *Ormulum* by Orm, an Augustinian canon in the north of England. Written in some 20,000 lines arranged in unrhymed but metrically rigid couplets, the work is interesting mainly in that the manuscript that preserves it is Orm's autograph and shows his somewhat fussy efforts to reform and regularize English spelling. Other biblical paraphrases are *Genesis and Exodus*, *Jacob and Joseph*, and the vast *Cursor mundi*, whose subject, as its title suggests, is the history of the world. An especially popular work was the *South English Legendary*, which began as a miscellaneous collection of saints' lives but was expanded by later redactors and rearranged in the order of the church calendar. The didactic tradition continued into the 14th century with Robert Mannyng's *Handling Sin*, a confessional manual whose expected dryness is relieved by the insertion of lively narratives, and the *Prick of Conscience*, a popular summary of theology sometimes attributed to the mystic Richard Rolle.

Verse romance

The earliest examples of verse romance, a genre that would remain popular through the Middle Ages, appeared in the 13th century. *King Horn* and *Floris and Blauncheflour* both are preserved in a manuscript of about 1250. *King Horn*, oddly written in short two- and three-stress lines, is a vigorous tale of a kingdom lost and regained, with a subplot concerning Horn's love for Princess Rymenhild. *Floris and Blauncheflour* is more exotic, being the tale of a pair of royal lovers who become separated and, after various adventures in eastern lands, reunited. Not much later than these is *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, a tale of princely love and adventure similar to *King Horn* but more competently executed. Many more such romances were produced in the 14th century. Popular subgenres were "the matter of Britain" (Arthurian romances such as *Of Arthour and of Merlin* and *Ywain and Gawain*), "the matter of Troy" (tales of antiquity such as *The Siege of Troy* and *King Alisaunder*), and the English Breton lays (stories of otherworldly magic, such as *Lai le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*, modeled after those of professional Breton storytellers). These relatively unsophisticated works were written for a bourgeois audience, and the manuscripts that preserve them are early examples of commercial book production. The humorous beast epic makes its first appearance in Britain in the 13th century with *The Fox and the Wolf*, taken indirectly from the Old French *Roman de Renart*. In the same manuscript with this work is *Dame Sirith*, the earliest English fabliau. Another sort of humor is found in *The Land of Cockaygne*, which depicts a utopia better than heaven, where rivers run with milk, honey, and wine, geese fly about already roasted, and monks hunt with hawks and dance with nuns.

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England: Literature

The lyric

The lyric was virtually unknown to Old English poets. Poems such as "Deor" and "Wulf and Eadwacer," which have been called lyrics, are thematically different from those that began to circulate orally in the 12th century and to be written down in great numbers in the 13th; these Old English poems also have a stronger narrative component than the later productions. The most frequent topics in the Middle English secular lyric are springtime and romantic love; many rework such themes tediously, but some, such as "Foweles in the frith" (13th century) and "Ich am of Irlaunde" (14th century), convey strong emotions in a few lines. Two lyrics of the early 13th century, "Mirie it is while sumer ilast" and "Sumer is icumen in," are preserved with musical settings, and probably most of the others were meant to be sung. The dominant mood of the religious lyrics is passionate: the poets sorrow for Christ on the cross and for the Virgin Mary, celebrate the "five joys" of Mary, and import language from love poetry to express religious devotion. Excellent early examples are "Nou goth sonne under wod" and "Stond wel, moder, ounder rode." Many of the lyrics are preserved in manuscript anthologies, of which the best is British Library manuscript Harley 2253 from the early 14th century. In this collection, known as the Harley Lyrics, the love poems, such as "Alysoun" and "Blow, Northern Wind," take after the poems of the Provençal troubadours but are less formal, less abstract, and more lively. The religious lyrics also are of high quality; but the most remarkable of the Harley Lyrics, "The Man in the Moon," far from being about love or religion, imagines the man in the Moon as a simple peasant, sympathizes with his hard life, and offers him some useful advice on how to best the village hayward (a local officer in charge of a town's common herd of cattle).

A poem such as "The Man in the Moon" serves as a reminder that, although the poetry of the early Middle English period was increasingly influenced by the Anglo-Norman literature produced for the courts, it is seldom "courtly." Most English poets, whether writing about kings or peasants, looked at life from a bourgeois perspective. If their work sometimes lacks sophistication, it nevertheless has a vitality that comes from preoccupation with daily affairs.

Prose

Old English prose texts were copied for more than a century after the Norman Conquest; the homilies of Aelfric were especially popular, and King Alfred's translations of Boethius and Augustine survive only in 12th-century manuscripts. In the early 13th century an anonymous worker at Worcester supplied glosses to certain words in a number of Old English manuscripts, which demonstrates that by this time the older language was beginning to pose difficulties for readers.

The composition of English prose also continued without interruption. Two manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle exhibit very strong prose for years after the conquest, and one of these, the Peterborough Chronicle, continues to 1154. Two manuscripts of about 1200 contain 12th-century sermons, and another has the workmanlike compilation *Vices and Virtues,* composed about 1200. But the English language faced stiff competition from both Anglo-Norman (the insular dialect of French being used increasingly in the monasteries) and Latin, a language intelligible to speakers of both English and French. It was inevitable, then, that the production of English prose should decline in quantity, if not in quality. The great prose works of this period were composed mainly for those who could read only English—women especially. In the West Midlands the Old English alliterative prose tradition remained very much alive into the 13th century, when the several texts known collectively as the Katherine Group were written. *St. Katherine*, *St. Margaret*, and *St. Juliana*, found together in a single manuscript, have rhythms strongly reminiscent of those of Aelfric and Wulfstan. So to a lesser extent do *Hali Meithhad* ("Holy Maidenhood") and *Sawles Warde* ("The Guardianship of the Soul") from the same book, but newer influences can be seen in these works as well: as the title of another devotional piece, *The Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* ("The Wooing of Our Lord"), suggests, the prose of this time often has a rapturous, even sensual flavor, and, like the poetry, it frequently employs the language of love to express religious fervor.

Further removed from the Old English prose tradition, though often associated with the Katherine Group, is the *Ancrene Wisse* ("Guide for Anchoresses," also known as the *Ancrene Riwle*, or "Rule for Anchoresses"), a manual for the guidance of women recluses outside the regular orders. This anonymous work, which was translated into French and Latin and remained popular until the 16th century, is notable for its humanity, practicality, and insight into human nature but even more for its brilliant style. Like the other prose of its time, it uses alliteration as ornament, but it is more indebted to new fashions in preaching, which had originated in the universities, than to native traditions. With its richly figurative language, rhetorically crafted sentences, and carefully logical divisions and subdivisions, it manages to achieve in English the effects that such contemporary writers as John of Salisbury and Walter Map were striving for in Latin.

Little noteworthy prose was written in the late 13th century. In the early 14th century Dan Michel of Northgate produced in Kentish the *Ayenbite of Inwit* ("Prick of Conscience"), a translation from French. But the best prose of this time is by the mystic Richard Rolle, the hermit of Hampole, whose English tracts include *The Commandment*, *Meditations on the Passion*, and *The Form of Perfect Living*, among others. His intense and stylized prose was among the most popular of the 14th century and inspired such later works as Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Julian of Norwich's *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, and the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*.

Peter S. Baker

The later Middle English and early Renaissance periods

One of the most important factors in the nature and development of English literature between about 1350 and 1550 was the peculiar linguistic situation in England at the beginning of the period. Among the small minority of the population that could be regarded as literate, bilingualism and even trilingualism were common. Insofar as it was considered a serious literary medium at all, English was obliged to compete on uneven terms with Latin and with the Anglo-Norman dialect of French widely used in England at the time. Moreover, extreme dialectal diversity within English itself made it difficult for vernacular writings, irrespective of their literary pretensions, to circulate very far outside their immediate areas of composition, a disadvantage not suffered by writings in Anglo-Norman and Latin. Literary culture managed to survive and in fact to flourish in the face of such potentially crushing factors as the catastrophic mortality of the Black Death (1347–51), chronic external and internal military conflicts in the form of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses, and serious social, political, and religious unrest, as evinced in the Peasants' Revolt (1381) and the rise of Lollardism (centered on the religious teachings of John Wycliffe). All the more remarkable, then, was the literary and linguistic revolution that took place in England between about 1350 and 1400 and that was slowly and soberly consolidated over the subsequent 150 years.

Later Middle English poetry

The revival of alliterative poetry

The most puzzling episode in the development of later Middle English literature is the apparently sudden reappearance of unrhymed alliterative poetry in the mid-14th century. Debate continues as to whether the group of long, serious, and sometimes learned poems written between about 1350 and the first decade of the 15th century should be regarded as an "alliterative revival" or rather as the late flowering of a largely lost native tradition stretching back to the Old English period. The earliest examples of the phenomenon, *William of Palerne* and *Winner and Waster*, are both datable to the 1350s, but neither poem exhibits to the full all the characteristics of the slightly later poems central to the movement. *William of Palerne*, condescendingly commissioned by a nobleman for the benefit of "them that know no French," is a homely paraphrase of a courtly Continental romance, the only poem in the group to take love as its central theme. The poet's technical competence in handling the difficult syntax and diction of the alliterative style is not, however, to be compared with that of *Winner and Waster*'s author, who exhibits full mastery of the form, particularly in descriptions of setting and spectacle. This poem's topical concern with social satire links it primarily with another, less formal body of alliterative verse, of which William Langland's *Piers Plowman* was the principal representative and exemplar. Indeed, *Winner and Waster*, with its sense of social commitment and occasional apocalyptic gesture, may well have served as a source of inspiration for Langland himself.

The term *alliterative revival* should not be taken to imply a return to the principles of classical Old English versification. The authors of the later 14th-century alliterative poems either inherited or developed their own conventions, which resemble those of the Old English tradition in only the most general way. The syntax and particularly the diction of later Middle English alliterative verse were also distinctive, and the search for alliterating phrases and constructions led to the extensive use of archaic, technical, and dialectal words. Hunts, feasts, battles, storms, and landscapes were described with a brilliant concretion of detail rarely paralleled since, while the abler poets also contrived subtle modulations of the staple verse-paragraph to accommodate dialogue, discourse, and argument. Among the poems central to the movement were three pieces dealing with the life and legends of Alexander the Great, the massive *Destruction of Troy*, and the *Siege of Jerusalem*. The fact that all of these derived from various Latin sources suggests that the anonymous poets were likely to have been clerics with a strong, if bookish, historical sense of their romance "matters." The "matter of Britain" was represented by an outstanding composition, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, an epic portrayal of King Arthur's conquests in Europe and his eventual fall, which combined a strong narrative thrust with considerable density and subtlety of diction. A gathering sense of inevitable transitoriness gradually tempers the virile realization of heroic idealism, and it is not surprising to find that the poem was later used by Sir Thomas Malory as a source for his prose account of the Arthurian legend, *Le Morte Darthur* (completed c. 1470).

The alliterative movement would today be regarded as a curious but inconsiderable episode were it not for four other poems now generally attributed to a single anonymous author: the chivalric romance *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*, two homiletic poems called *Patience* and *Purity* (or *Cleanness*), and an elegiac dream vision known as *Pearl*, all miraculously preserved in a single manuscript dated about 1400. The poet of *Sir Gawayne* far exceeded the other alliterative writers in his mastery of form and style, and, though he wrote ultimately as a moralist, human warmth and sympathy (often taking comic form) are also close to the heart of his work. *Patience* relates the biblical story of Jonah as a human comedy of petulance and irascibility set off against God's benign forbearance. *Purity* imaginatively re-creates several monitory narratives of human impurity and its consequences in a spectacular display of poetic skill: the Flood, the destruction of Sodom, and Belshazzar's Feast. The poet's principal achievement, however, was *Sir Gawayne*, in which he used the conventional apparatus of chivalric romance to engage in a serious exploration of moral conduct in the face of the unknown. The hero, Gawain, a questing knight of Arthur's court, embodies a combination of the noblest chivalric and spiritual aspirations of the age, but, instead of triumphing in the conventional way, he fails when tested (albeit rather unfairly) by mysterious supernatural powers. No paraphrase can hope to recapture the imaginative resources displayed in the telling of the story and the structuring of the poem as a work of art. *Pearl* stands somewhat aside from the alliterative movement proper. In common with a number of other poems of the period, it was composed in stanzaic form, with alliteration used for ornamental effect. Technically, it is one of the most complex poems in the language, an attempt to work in words an analogy to the jeweler's art. The jeweler-poet is vouchsafed a heavenly vision in which he sees his pearl, the discreet symbol used in the poem for a lost infant daughter who has died to become a bride of Christ. She offers theological consolation for his grief, expounding the way of salvation and the place of human life in a transcendental and extra-temporal view of things.

The alliterative movement was primarily confined to poets writing in northern and northwestern England, who showed little regard for courtly, London-based literary developments. It is likely that alliterative poetry, under aristocratic patronage, filled a gap in the literary life of the provinces caused by the decline of Anglo-Norman in the latter half of the 14th century. Alliterative poetry was not unknown in London and the southeast, but it penetrated those areas in a modified form and in poems that dealt with different subject matter.

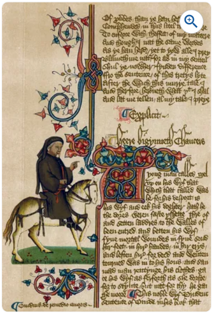
William Langland's long alliterative poem *Piers Plowman* begins with a vision of the world seen from the Malvern Hills in Worcestershire, where, tradition has it, the poet was born and brought up and where he would have been open to the influence of the alliterative movement. If what he tells about himself in the poem is true (and there is no other source of information), he later lived obscurely in London as an unbeneficed cleric. Langland wrote in the unrhymed alliterative mode, but he modified it in such a way as to make it more accessible to a wider audience by treating the meter more loosely and avoiding the arcane diction of the provincial poets. His poem exists in at least three and possibly four versions: A, *Piers Plowman* in its short early form, dating from the 1360s; B, a major revision and extension of A made in the late 1370s; C (1380s), a less "literary" version of B, apparently intended to bring its doctrinal issues into clearer focus; and Z, a conjectured version that calls into question the dating for A, B, and C. The poem takes the form of a series of dream visions dealing with the social and spiritual predicament of late 14th-century England against a somber apocalyptic backdrop. Realistic and allegorical elements are mingled in a phantasmagoric way, and both the poetic medium and the structure are frequently subverted by the writer's spiritual and didactic impulses. Passages of involuted theological reasoning mingle with scatological satire, and moments of sublime religious feeling appear alongside forthright political comment. This makes it a work of the utmost difficulty, defiant of categorization, but at the same time Langland never fails to convince the reader of the passionate integrity of his writing. His bitter attacks on political and ecclesiastical corruption (especially among the friars) quickly struck chords with his contemporaries. Among minor poems in the same vein are *Mum and the Sothsegger* (c. 1399–1406) and a Lollard piece called *Pierce the Ploughman's Creed* (c. 1395). In the 16th century, *Piers Plowman* was issued as a printed book and was used for apologetic purposes by the early Protestants.

Courtly poetry

Apart from a few late and minor reappearances in Scotland and the northwest of England, the alliterative movement was over before the first quarter of the 15th century had passed. The other major strand in the development of English poetry from roughly 1350 proved much more durable. The cultivation and refinement of human sentiment with respect to love, already present in earlier 14th-century writings such as the Harley Lyrics, took firm root in English court culture during the reign of Richard II (1377–99). English began to displace Anglo-Norman as the language spoken at court and in aristocratic circles, and signs of royal and noble patronage for English vernacular writers became evident. These processes undoubtedly created some of the conditions in which a writer of Chaucer’s interests and temperament might flourish, but they were encouraged and given direction by his genius in establishing English as a literary language.

Chaucer and Gower

Geoffrey Chaucer, a Londoner of bourgeois origins, was at various times a courtier, a diplomat, and a civil servant. His poetry frequently (but not always unironically) reflects the views and values associated with the term *courtly*. It is in some ways not easy to account for his decision to write in English, and it is not surprising that his earliest substantial poems, the *Book of the Duchess* (c. 1370) and the *House of Fame* (1370s), were heavily indebted to the fashionable French courtly love poetry of the time. Also of French origin was the octosyllabic couplet used in these poems. Chaucer’s abandonment of this engaging but ultimately jejune meter in favor of a 10-syllable line (specifically, iambic pentameter) was a portentous moment for English poetry. His mastery of it was first revealed in stanzaic form, notably the seven-line stanza (rhyme royal) of the *Parliament of Fowls* (c. 1382) and *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385), and later was extended in the decasyllabic couplets of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (1380s) and large parts of *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400).



Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales* A 15th-century manuscript page from Geoffrey Chaucer's frame story *The Canterbury*...(more)

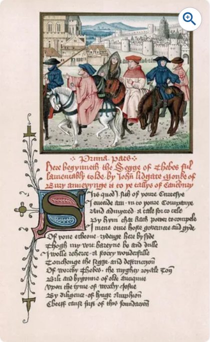
Though Chaucer wrote a number of moral and amatory lyrics, which were imitated by his 15th-century followers, his major achievements were in the field of narrative poetry. The early influence of French courtly love poetry (notably the *Roman de la Rose*, which he translated) gave way to an interest in Italian literature. Chaucer was acquainted with Dante’s writings and took a story from Petrarch for the substance of “The Clerk’s Tale.” Two of his major poems, *Troilus and Criseyde* and “The Knight’s Tale,” were based, respectively, on the *Filostrato* and the *Teseida* of Boccaccio. The *Troilus*, Chaucer’s single most ambitious poem, is a moving story of love gained and betrayed set against the background of the Trojan War. As well as being a poem of profound human sympathy and insight, it also has a marked philosophical dimension derived from Chaucer’s reading of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae*, a work that he also translated in prose. His consummate skill in narrative art, however, was most fully displayed in *The Canterbury Tales*, an unfinished series of stories purporting to be told by a group of pilgrims journeying from London to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket and back. The illusion that the individual pilgrims (rather than Chaucer himself) tell their tales gave him an unprecedented freedom of authorial stance, which enabled him to explore the rich fictive potentialities of a number of genres: pious legend (in “The Man of Law’s Tale” and “The Prioress’s Tale”), fabliau (“The Shipman’s Tale,” “The Miller’s Tale,” and “The Reeve’s Tale”), chivalric romance (“The Knight’s Tale”), popular romance (parodied in Chaucer’s “own” “Tale of Sir Thopas”), beast fable (“The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and “The Manciple’s Tale”), and more—what the poet John Dryden later summed up as “God’s plenty.”

A recurrent concern in Chaucer’s writings is the refined and sophisticated cultivation of love, commonly described by the modern expression *courtly love*. A French term of Chaucer’s time, *fine amour*, gives a more authentic description of the phenomenon; Chaucer’s friend John Gower translated it as “fine loving” in his long poem *Confessio amantis* (begun c. 1386). The *Confessio* runs to some 33,000 lines in octosyllabic couplets and takes the form of a collection of exemplary tales placed within the framework of a lover’s confession to a priest of Venus. Gower provides a contrast to Chaucer in that the sober and earnest moral intent behind Gower’s writing is always clear, whereas Chaucer can be noncommittal and evasive. On the other hand, though Gower’s verse is generally fluent and pleasing to read, it has a thin homogeneity of texture that cannot compare with the color and range found in the language of his great contemporary. Gower was undoubtedly extremely learned by lay standards, and many Classical myths (especially those deriving from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) make the first of their numerous appearances in English literature in the *Confessio*. Gower was also deeply concerned with the moral and social condition of contemporary society, and he dealt with it in two weighty compositions in French and Latin, respectively: the *Mirour de l'omme* (c. 1374–78; *The Mirror of Mankind*) and *Vox clamantis* (c. 1385; *The Voice of One Crying*).

Poetry after Chaucer and Gower

Courtly poetry

The numerous 15th-century followers of Chaucer continued to treat the conventional range of courtly and moralizing topics, but only rarely with the intelligence and stylistic accomplishment of their distinguished predecessors. The canon of Chaucer's works began to accumulate delightful but apocryphal trifles such as "The Flower and the Leaf" and "The Assembly of Ladies" (both c. 1475), the former, like a surprising quantity of 15th-century verse of this type, purportedly written by a woman. The stock figures of the ardent but endlessly frustrated lover and the irresistible but disdainful lady were cultivated as part of the "game of love" depicted in numerous courtly lyrics. By the 15th century, vernacular literacy was spreading rapidly among both men and women of the laity, with the influence of French courtly love poetry remaining strong. Aristocratic and knightly versifiers such as Charles, duc d'Orléans (captured at Agincourt in 1415), his "jailer" William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk, and Sir Richard Ros (translator of Alain Chartier's influential *La Belle Dame sans merci*) were widely read and imitated among the gentry and in bourgeois circles well into the 16th century.



English poet and monk John Lydgate with pilgrims John Lydgate and the Canterbury pilgrims leaving Canterbury, miniatur...(more)

Both Chaucer and Gower had to some extent enjoyed royal and aristocratic patronage, and the active seeking of patronage became a pervasive feature of the 15th-century literary scene. Thomas Hoccleve, a minor civil servant who probably knew Chaucer and claimed to be his disciple, dedicated *The Regiment of Princes* (c. 1412), culled from an earlier work of the same name, to the future king Henry V. Most of Hoccleve's compositions seem to have been written with an eye to patronage, and, though they occasionally yield unexpected glimpses of his daily and private lives, they have little to recommend them as poetry. Hoccleve's aspiration to be Chaucer's successor was rapidly overshadowed, in sheer bulk if not necessarily in literary merit, by the formidable oeuvre of John Lydgate, a monk at the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. Lydgate, too, was greatly stimulated at the prospects opened up by distinguished patronage and produced as a result a number of very long pieces that were greatly admired in their day. A staunch Lancastrian, Lydgate dedicated his *Troy Book* (1412–21) and *Life of Our Lady* to Henry V and his *Fall of Princes* (1431–38; based ultimately on Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*) to Humphrey Plantagenet, duke of Gloucester. He also essayed courtly verse in Chaucer's manner (*The Complaint of the Black Knight* and *The Temple of Glass*), but his imitation of the master's style was rarely successful. Both Lydgate and Hoccleve admired above all Chaucer's "eloquence," by which they meant mainly the Latinate elements in his diction. Their own painfully polysyllabic style, which came to be known as the "aureate" style, was widely imitated for more than a century. In sum, the major 15th-century English poets were generally undistinguished as successors of Chaucer, and, for a significant but independent extension of his achievement, one must look to the Scottish courtly poets known as the *makaris* ("makers"), among whom were King James I of Scotland, Robert Henryson, and William Dunbar.

Lydgate's following at court gave him a central place in 15th-century literary life, but the typical concerns shown by his verse do not distinguish it from a great body of religious, moral, historical, and didactic writing, much of it anonymous. A few identifiable provincial writers turn out to have had their own local patrons, often among the country gentry. East Anglia may be said to have produced a minor school in the works of John Capgrave, Osbern Bokenam, and John Metham, among others also active during the middle of the century. Some of the most moving and accomplished verse of the time is to be found in the anonymous lyrics and carols (songs with a refrain) on conventional subjects such as the transience of life, the coming of death, the sufferings of Christ, and other penitential themes. The author of some distinctive poems in this mode was John Audelay of Shropshire, whose style was heavily influenced by the alliterative movement. Literary devotion to the Virgin Mary was particularly prominent and at its best could produce masterpieces of artful simplicity, such as the poem "I sing of a maiden that is makeless [matchless]."

Popular and secular verse

The art that conceals art was also characteristic of the best popular and secular verse of the period, outside the courtly mode. Some of the shorter verse romances, usually in a form called tail rhyme, were far from negligible: *Ywain and Gawain*, from the *Yvain* of Chrétien de Troyes; *Sir Launfal*, after Marie de France's *Lanval*; and *Sir Degrevant*. Humorous and lewd songs, versified tales, folk songs, ballads, and others form a lively body of compositions. Oral transmission was probably common, and the survival of much of what is extant is fortuitous. The manuscript known as the Percy Folio, a 17th-century antiquarian collection of such material, may be a fair sampling of the repertoire of the late medieval itinerant entertainer. In addition to a number of popular romances of the type satirized long before by Chaucer in "Sir Thopas," the Percy manuscript also contains a number of impressive ballads very much like those collected from oral sources in the 18th and 19th centuries. The extent of medieval origin of the poems collected in Francis J. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98) is debatable. Several of the Robin Hood ballads undoubtedly were known in the 15th century, and the characteristic laconically repetitious and incremental style of the ballads is also to be seen in the enigmatic *Corpus Christi Carol*, preserved in an early 16th-century London grocer's commonplace book. In the same manuscript, but in a rather different vein, is *The Nut-Brown Maid*, an expertly managed dialogue-poem on female constancy.

Political verse

A genre that does not fit easily into the categories already mentioned is political verse, of which a good deal was written in the 15th century. Much of it was avowedly and often crudely propagandist, especially during the Wars of the Roses, though a piece like the *Agincourt Carol* shows that it was already possible to strike the characteristically English note of insular patriotism soon after 1415. Of particular interest is the *Libel of English Policy* (c. 1436) on another typically English theme of a related kind: "Cherish merchandise, keep the admiralty, / That we be masters of the narrow sea."

Later Middle English prose

The continuity of a tradition in English prose writing, linking the later with the early Middle English period, is somewhat clearer than that detected in verse. The *Ancrene Wisse*, for example, continued to be copied and adapted to suit changing tastes and circumstances. But sudden and brilliant imaginative phenomena like the writings of Chaucer, Langland, and the author of *Sir Gawayne* are not to be found in prose. Instead came steady growth in the composition of religious prose of various kinds and the first appearance of secular prose in any quantity.

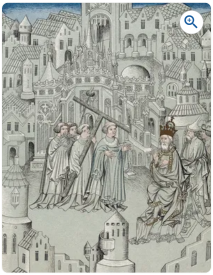
Religious prose

Of the first importance was the development of a sober, analytical, but nonetheless impressive kind of contemplative or mystical prose, represented by Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*. The authors of these pieces certainly knew the more rugged and fervent writings of their earlier, 14th-century predecessor Richard Rolle, and to some extent they reacted against what they saw as excesses in the style and content of his work. It is of particular interest to note that the mystical tradition was continued into the 15th century, though in very different ways, by two women writers, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Julian, often regarded as the first English woman of letters, underwent a series of mystical experiences in 1373 about which she wrote in her *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, one of the foremost works of English spirituality by the standards of any age. Rather different religious experiences went into the making of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1432–36), the extraordinary autobiographical record of a bourgeoise woman, dictated to two clerks. The nature and status of its spiritual content remain controversial, but its often engaging colloquial style and vivid realization of the medieval scene are of abiding interest.

Another important branch of the contemplative movement in prose involved the translation of Continental Latin texts. A major example, and one of the best-loved of all medieval English books in its time, is *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (c. 1410), Nicholas Love's translation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, attributed to St. Bonaventure. Love's work was particularly valued by the church as an orthodox counterbalance to the heretical tendencies of the Lollards, who espoused the teachings of John Wycliffe and his circle. The Lollard movement generated a good deal of stylistically distinctive prose writing, though as the Lollards soon came under threat of death by burning, nearly all of it remains anonymous. A number of English works have been attributed to Wycliffe himself, and the first English translation of the Bible to Wycliffe's disciple John Purvey, but there are no firm grounds for these attributions. The Lollard Bible, which exists in a crude early form and in a more impressive later version (supposedly Purvey's work), was widely read in spite of being under doctrinal suspicion. It later influenced William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, completed in 1525, and, through Tyndale, the King James Version (1611).

Secular prose

Secular compositions and translations in prose also came into prominence in the last quarter of the 14th century, though their stylistic accomplishment does not always match that of the religious tradition. Chaucer's "Tale of Melibeus" and his two astronomical translations, the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* and the *Equatorie of the Planets*, were relatively modest endeavors beside the massive efforts of John of Trevisa, who translated from Latin both Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon* (c. 1385–87), a universal history, and Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* (1398; "On the Properties of Things"), an encyclopedia. Judging by the number of surviving manuscripts, however, the most widely read secular prose work of the period is likely to have been *The Voyage and Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the supposed adventures of Sir John Mandeville, knight of St. Albans, on his journeys through Asia. Though the work now is believed to be purely fictional, its exotic allure and the occasionally arch style of its author were popular with the English reading public down to the 18th century.



The Travels of Sir John Mandeville Illustration from *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, c. 1372.

The 15th century saw the consolidation of English prose as a respectable medium for serious writings of various kinds. The anonymous *Brut* chronicle survives in more manuscripts than any other medieval English work and was instrumental in fostering a new sense of national identity. John Capgrave's *Chronicle of England* (c. 1462) and Sir John Fortescue's *On the Governance of England* (c. 1470) were part of the same trend. At its best, the style of such works could be vigorous and straightforward, close to the language of everyday speech, like that found in the chance survivals of private letters of the period. Best known and most numerous among letters are those of the Paston family of Norfolk, but significant collections were also left by the Celys of London and the Stonors of Oxfordshire. More-eccentric prose stylists of the period were the religious controversialist Reginald Pecock and John Skelton, whose aureate translation of the *Bibliotheca historica* of Diodorus Siculus stands in marked contrast to the demotic exuberance of his verse.

The crowning achievement of later Middle English prose writing was Sir Thomas Malory's cycle of Arthurian legends, which was given the title *Le Morte Darthur* by William Caxton when he printed his edition in 1485. There is still uncertainty as to the identity of Malory, who described himself as a "knight-prisoner." The characteristic mixture of chivalric nostalgia and tragic feeling with which he imbued his book gave fresh inspiration to the tradition of writing on Arthurian themes. The nature of Malory's artistry eludes easy definition, and the degree to which the effects he achieved were a matter of conscious contrivance on his part is debatable. Much of *Le Morte Darthur* was translated from prolix French prose romances, and Malory evidently selected and condensed his material with instinctive mastery as he went along. At the same time, he cast narrative and dialogue in the cadences of a virile and natural English prose that matched the nobility of both the characters and the theme.

Middle English drama

Because the manuscripts of medieval English plays were usually ephemeral performance scripts rather than reading matter, very few examples have survived from what once must have been a very large dramatic literature. What little survives from before the 15th century includes some bilingual fragments, indicating that the same play might have been given in English or Anglo-Norman, according to the composition of the audience. From the late 14th century onward, two main dramatic genres are discernible, the mystery, or Corpus Christi, cycles and the morality plays. The mystery plays were long cyclic dramas of the Creation, Fall, and Redemption of humankind, based mostly on biblical narratives. They usually included a selection of Old Testament episodes (such as the stories of Cain and Abel and of Abraham and Isaac) but concentrated mainly on the life and Passion of Jesus Christ. They always ended with the Last Judgment. The cycles were generally financed and performed by the craft guilds and staged on wagons in the streets and squares of the towns. Texts of the cycles staged at York, Chester, and Wakefield and at an unstated location in East Anglia (the so-called N-Town plays) have survived, together with fragments from Coventry, Newcastle, and Norwich. Their literary quality is uneven, but the York cycle (probably the oldest) has an impressively realized version of Christ's Passion by a dramatist influenced by the alliterative style in verse. The Wakefield cycle has several particularly brilliant plays, attributed to the anonymous Wakefield Master, and his *Second Shepherds' Play* is one of the masterpieces of medieval English literature. The morality plays were allegorical dramas depicting the progress of a single character, representing the whole of humankind, from the cradle to the grave and sometimes beyond. The other dramatis personae might include God and the Devil but usually consisted of personified abstractions, such as the Vices and Virtues, Death, Penance, Mercy, and so forth. A varied collection of the moralities is known as the Macro Plays (*The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind*), but the single most impressive piece is *Everyman*, an English rendering of a Dutch play on the subject of the coming of death. Both the mystery and morality plays were frequently revived and performed into the 21st century.

The transition from medieval to Renaissance

The 15th century was a major period of growth in lay literacy, a process powerfully expedited by the introduction into England of printing by William Caxton in 1476. Caxton published Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* in the same year (1485) that Henry Tudor acceded to the throne as Henry VII, and the period from this time to the mid-16th century has been called the transition from medieval to Renaissance in English literature. A typical figure was the translator Alexander Barclay. His *Eclogues* (c. 1515), drawn from 15th-century Italian humanist sources, was an early essay in the fashionable Renaissance genre of pastoral, while his rendering of Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* as *The Ship of Fools* (1509) is a thoroughly medieval satire on contemporary folly and corruption. *The Pastime of Pleasure* (completed in 1506; published 1509) by Stephen Hawes, ostensibly an allegorical romance in Lydgate's manner, unexpectedly adumbrates the great Tudor theme of academic cultivation as a necessary accomplishment of the courtly knight or gentleman.

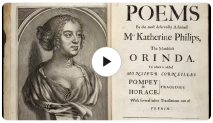
The themes of education and good government predominate in the new humanist writing of the 16th century, both in discursive prose (such as Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor* [1531] and Roger Ascham's *Toxophilus* [1545; "Lover of the Bow"] and *The Schoolmaster* [1570]) and in drama (the plays of Henry Medwall and Richard Rastall). The preeminent work of English humanism, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), was composed in Latin and appeared in an English translation in 1551. The most distinctive voice in the poetry of the time was that of John Skelton, tutor to Henry VII's sons and author of an extraordinary range of writing, often in an equally extraordinary style. His works include a long play, *Magnificence* (1516), like his *Bowge of Court* (c. 1498) an allegorical satire on court intrigue;

intemperate satirical invectives, such as *Collyn Clout* and *Why Come Ye Not to Court?* (both 1522); and reflexive essays on the role of the poet and poetry, in *Speak, Parrot* (written 1521) and *The Garland of Laurel* (1523). The first half of the 16th century was also a notable period for courtly lyric verse in the stricter sense of poems with musical settings, such as those found in the Devonshire Manuscript. This is very much the literary milieu of the “courtly makers” Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, but, though the courtly context of much of their writing is of medieval origin, their most distinctive achievements look to the future. Poems such as Wyatt’s “They flee from me” and “Whoso list to hunt” vibrate with personal feeling at odds with the medieval convention of anonymity, while Surrey’s translations from the *Aeneid* introduce blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) into English for the first time, providing an essential foundation for the achievements of Shakespeare and John Milton.

Richard Beadle

The Renaissance period: 1550–1660

Literature and the age



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In a tradition of literature remarkable for its exacting and brilliant achievements, the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods have been said to represent the most brilliant century of all. (The reign of Elizabeth I began in 1558 and ended with her death in 1603; she was succeeded by the Stuart king James VI of Scotland, who took the title James I of England as well. English literature of his reign as James I, from 1603 to 1625, is properly called Jacobean.) These years produced a gallery of authors of genius, some of whom have never been surpassed, and conferred on scores of lesser talents the enviable ability to write with fluency, imagination, and verve. From one point of view, this sudden renaissance looks radiant, confident, heroic—and belated, but all the more dazzling for its belatedness. Yet, from another point of view, this was a time of unusually traumatic strain, in which English society underwent massive disruptions that transformed it on every front and decisively affected the life of every individual. In the brief, intense moment in which England assimilated the European Renaissance, the circumstances that made the assimilation possible were already disintegrating and calling into question the newly won certainties, as well as the older truths that they were dislodging. This doubleness, of new possibilities and new doubts simultaneously apprehended, gives the literature its unrivaled intensity.

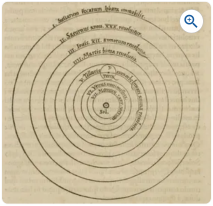
Social conditions

In this period England’s population doubled; prices rocketed, rents followed, old social loyalties dissolved, and new industrial, agricultural, and commercial veins were first tapped. Real wages hit an all-time low in the 1620s, and social relations were plunged into a state of fluidity from which the merchant and the ambitious lesser gentleman profited at the expense of the aristocrat and the laborer, as satires and comedies current from the 1590s complain. Behind the Elizabethan vogue for pastoral poetry lies the fact of the prosperity of the enclosing sheep farmer, who sought to increase pasture at the expense of the peasantry. Tudor platitudes about order and degree could neither combat nor survive the challenge posed to rank by these arrivistes. The position of the crown, politically dominant yet financially insecure, had always been potentially unstable, and, when Charles I lost the confidence of his greater subjects in the 1640s, his authority crumbled. Meanwhile, the huge body of poor fell ever further behind the rich; the pamphlets of Thomas Harman (1566) and Robert Greene (1591–92), as well as Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (1605–06), provide glimpses of a horrific world of vagabondage and crime, the Elizabethans’ biggest, unsolvable social problem.

Intellectual and religious revolution

The barely disguised social ferment was accompanied by an intellectual revolution, as the medieval synthesis collapsed before the new science, new religion, and new humanism. While modern mechanical technologies were pressed into service by the Stuarts to create the scenic wonders of the court masque, the discoveries of astronomers and explorers were redrawing the cosmos in a way that was profoundly disturbing:

> And freely men confess that this world's spent,
> When in the planets, and the firmament
> They seek so many new....
>
> (John Donne, *The First Anniversary*, 1611)



Nicolaus Copernicus: heliocentric system Engraving of the solar system from Nicolaus Copernicus's *De revolutionil*...(more)

The majority of people were more immediately affected by the religious revolutions of the 16th century. A person in early adulthood at the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 would, by her death in 1603, have been vouchsafed an unusually disillusioning insight into the duty owed by private conscience to the needs of the state. The Tudor church hierarchy was an instrument of social and political control, yet the mid-century controversies over the faith had already wrecked any easy confidence in the authority of doctrines and forms and had taught people to inquire carefully into the rationale of their own beliefs (as John Donne does in his third satire [c. 1596]). The Elizabethan ecclesiastical compromise was the object of continual criticism, from radicals both within (who desired progressive reforms, such as the abolition of bishops) and without (who desired the return of England to the Roman Catholic fold), but the incipient liberalism of individuals such as John Milton and the scholar and churchman William Chillingworth was held in check by the majority's unwillingness to tolerate a plurality of religions in a supposedly unitary state. Nor was the Calvinist orthodoxy that cradled most English writers comforting, for it told them that they were corrupt, unfree, unable to earn their own salvations, and subject to heavenly judgments that were arbitrary and absolute. Calvinism deeply affects the world of the Jacobean tragedies, whose heroes are not masters of their fates but victims of divine purposes that are terrifying yet inscrutable.

The race for cultural development

The third complicating factor was the race to catch up with Continental developments in arts and philosophy. The Tudors needed to create a class of educated diplomats, statesmen, and officials and to dignify their court by making it a fount of cultural as well as political patronage. The new learning, widely disseminated through the Erasmian (after the humanist Desiderius Erasmus) educational programs of such men as John Colet and Sir Thomas Elyot, proposed to use a systematic schooling in Latin authors and some Greek to encourage in the social elites a flexibility of mind and civilized serviceableness that would allow enlightened princely government to walk hand in hand with responsible scholarship. Humanism fostered an intimate familiarity with the classics that was a powerful incentive for the creation of an English literature of answerable dignity. It fostered as well a practical, secular piety that left its impress everywhere on Elizabethan writing. Humanism's effect, however, was modified by the simultaneous impact of the flourishing Continental cultures, particularly the Italian. Repeatedly, crucial innovations in English letters developed resources originating from Italy—such as the sonnet of Petrarch, the epic of Ludovico Ariosto, the pastoral of Jacopo Sannazzaro, the canzone, and blank verse—and values imported with these forms were in competition with the humanists' ethical preoccupations. Social ideals of wit, many-sidedness, and *sprezzatura* (accomplishment mixed with unaffectedness) were imbibed from Baldassare Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, translated as *The Courtyer* by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561, and Elizabethan court poetry is steeped in Castiglione's aristocratic Neoplatonism, his notions of universal proportion, and the love of beauty as the path to virtue. Equally significant was the welcome afforded to Niccolò Machiavelli, whose lessons were vilified publicly and absorbed in private. *The Prince*, written in 1513, was unavailable in English until 1640, but as early as the 1580s Gabriel Harvey, a friend of the poet Edmund Spenser, can be found enthusiastically hailing its author as the apostle of modern pragmatism. "We are much beholden to Machiavel and others," said Francis Bacon, "that write what men do, and not what they ought to do."

So the literary revival occurred in a society rife with tensions, uncertainties, and competing versions of order and authority, religion and status, sex and the self. The Elizabethan settlement was a compromise; the Tudor pretense that the people of England were unified in belief disguised the actual fragmentation of the old consensus under the strain of change. The new scientific knowledge proved both man's littleness and his power to command nature; against the Calvinist idea of man's helplessness pulled the humanist faith in his dignity, especially that conviction, derived from the reading of Seneca and so characteristic of the period, of man's constancy and fortitude, his heroic capacity for self-determination. It was still possible for Elizabeth to hold these divergent tendencies together in a single, heterogeneous culture, but under her successors they would eventually fly apart. The philosophers speaking for the new century would be Francis Bacon, who argued for the gradual advancement of science through patient accumulation of experiments, and the skeptic Michel de Montaigne (his *Essays* translated from the French by John Florio [1603]), who denied that it was possible to formulate any general principles of knowledge.

Cutting across all of these was the persistence of popular habits of thought and expression. Both humanism and Puritanism set themselves against vulgar ignorance and folk tradition, but, fortunately, neither could remain aloof for long from the robustness of popular taste. Sir Philip Sidney, in England's first Neoclassical literary treatise, *The Defence of Poesie* (written c. 1578–83, published 1595), candidly admitted that "the old song [i.e., ballad] of Percy and Douglas" would move his heart "more than with a trumpet," and his *Arcadia* (final version published in 1593) is a representative instance of the fruitful cross-fertilization of genres in this period—the contamination of aristocratic pastoral with popular tale, the lyric with the ballad, comedy with romance, tragedy with satire, and poetry with prose. The language, too, was undergoing a rapid expansion that all classes contributed to and benefited from, sophisticated literature borrowing without shame the idioms of colloquial speech. An allusion in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606–07) to heaven peeping "through the blanket of the dark" would become a "problem" only later, when, for instance, Samuel Johnson complained in 1751 that such words provoked laughter rather than awe. Johnson's was an age when tragic dignity implied politeness, when it was below the dignity of tragedy to mention so lowly an object as a blanket. But the Elizabethans' ability to address themselves to several audiences simultaneously and to bring into relation opposed experiences, emphases, and worldviews invested their writing with complexity and power.

Elizabethan poetry and prose

English poetry and prose burst into sudden glory in the late 1570s. A decisive shift of taste toward a fluent artistry self-consciously displaying its own grace and sophistication was announced in the works of Spenser and Sidney. It was accompanied by an upsurge in literary production that came to fruition in the 1590s and 1600s, two decades of astonishing productivity by writers of every persuasion and caliber.

The groundwork was laid in the 30 years from 1550, a period of slowly increasing confidence in the literary competence of the language and tremendous advances in education, which for the first time produced a substantial English readership, keen for literature and possessing cultivated tastes. This development was underpinned by the technological maturity and accelerating output (mainly in pious or technical subjects) of Elizabethan printing. The Stationers' Company, which controlled the publication of books, was incorporated in 1557, and Richard Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557) revolutionized the relationship of poet and audience by making publicly available lyric poetry, which hitherto had circulated only among a courtly coterie. Spenser was the first significant English poet deliberately to use print to advertise his talents.

Development of the English language

The prevailing opinion of the language's inadequacy, its lack of "terms" and innate inferiority to the eloquent Classical tongues, was combated in the work of the humanists Thomas Wilson, Roger Ascham, and Sir John Cheke, whose treatises on rhetoric, education, and even archery argued in favor of an unaffected

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vernacular prose and a judicious attitude toward linguistic borrowings. Their stylistic ideals are attractively embodied in Ascham's educational tract *The Schoolmaster* (1570), and their tonic effect on that particularly Elizabethan art, translation, can be felt in the earliest important examples, Sir Thomas Hoby's Castiglione (1561) and Sir Thomas North's Plutarch (1579). A further stimulus was the religious upheaval that took place in the middle of the century. The desire of reformers to address as comprehensive an audience as possible—the bishop and the boy who follows the plough, as William Tyndale put it—produced the first true classics of English prose: the reformed Anglican Book of Common Prayer (1549, 1552, 1559); John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563), which celebrates the martyrs, great and small, of English Protestantism; and the various English versions of the Bible, from Tyndale's New Testament (1525), Miles Coverdale's Bible (1535), and the Geneva Bible (1560) to the syncretic Authorized Version (or King James's Version, 1611). The latter's combination of grandeur and plainness is justly celebrated, even if it represents an idiom never spoken in heaven or on earth. Nationalism inspired by the Reformation motivated the historical chronicles of the capable and stylish Edward Hall (1548), who bequeathed to Shakespeare the tendentious Tudor interpretation of the 15th century, and of Raphael Holinshed (1577).

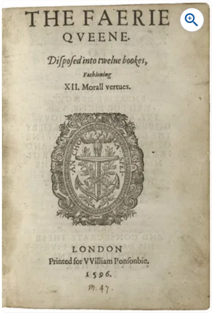
In verse, Tottel's much reprinted *Miscellany* generated a series of imitations and, by popularizing the lyrics of Sir Thomas Wyatt and the earl of Surrey, carried into the 1570s the tastes of the early Tudor court. The newer poets collected by Tottel and other anthologists include Nicholas Grimald, Richard Edwardes, George Turberville, Barnabe Googe, George Gascoigne, Sir John Harington, and many others, of whom Gascoigne is the most prominent. The modern preference for the ornamental manner of the next generation has eclipsed these poets, who continued the tradition of plain, weighty verse, addressing themselves to ethical and didactic themes and favoring the meditative lyric, satire, and epigram. But their taste for economy, restraint, and aphoristic density was, in the verse of Donne and Ben Jonson, to outlive the cult of elegance. The period's major project was *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559; enlarged editions 1563, 1578, 1587), a collection of verse laments, by several hands, purporting to be spoken by participants in the Wars of the Roses and preaching the Tudor doctrine of obedience. The quality is uneven, but Thomas Sackville's "Induction" and Thomas Churchyard's "Legend of Shore's Wife" are distinguished, and the intermingling of history, tragedy, and political morality was to be influential on the drama.

Sidney and Spenser

With the work of Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, Tottel's contributors suddenly began to look old-fashioned. Sidney epitomized the new Renaissance "universal man": a courtier, diplomat, soldier, and poet whose *Defence of Poesie* includes the first considered account of the state of English letters. Sidney's treatise defends literature on the ground of its unique power to teach, but his real emphasis is on its delight, its ability to depict the world not as it is but as it ought to be. This quality of "forcibleness or energia" he himself demonstrated in his sonnet sequence of unrequited desire, *Astrophel and Stella* (written 1582, published 1591). His *Arcadia*, in its first version (written c. 1577–80), is a pastoral romance in which courtiers disguised as Amazons and shepherds make love and sing delicate experimental verses. The revised version (written c. 1580–84, published 1590; the last three books of the first version were added in 1593), vastly expanded but abandoned in mid-sentence, added sprawling plots of heroism in love and war, philosophical and political discourses, and set pieces of aristocratic etiquette. Sidney was a dazzling and assured innovator whose pioneering of new forms and stylistic melody was seminal for his generation. His public fame was as an aristocratic champion of an aggressively Protestant foreign policy, but Elizabeth had no time for idealistic warmongering, and the unresolved conflicts in his poetry—desire against restraint, heroism against patience, rebellion against submission—mirror his own discomfort with his situation as an unsuccessful courtier.

Protestantism also loomed large in Spenser's life. He enjoyed the patronage of the earl of Leicester, who sought to advance militant Protestantism at court, and his poetic manifesto, *The Shepherds Calendar* (1579), covertly praised Archbishop Edmund Grindal, who had been suspended by Elizabeth for his Puritan sympathies. Spenser's masterpiece, *The Faerie Queene*

(1590–96), is an epic of Protestant nationalism in which the villains are infidels or papists, the hero is King Arthur, and the central value is married chastity.


THE FAERIE
QVEENE.
Diſpoſed into twelue bookes,
Faſhioning
XII. Morall vertues.
LONDON
Printed for VVilliam Ponſonbie.
1596.
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Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* Title page of a 1596 edition of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

Spenser was one of the humanistically trained breed of public servants, and the *Calendar*, an expertly crafted collection of pastoral eclogues, both advertised his talents and announced his epic ambitions. The exquisite lyric gift that it reveals was voiced again in the marriage poems *Epithalamion* (1595) and *Prothalamion* (1596). With *The Faerie Queene* he achieved the central poem of the Elizabethan period. Its form fuses the medieval allegory with the Italian romantic epic; its purpose was “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline.” The plan was for 12 books (6 were completed), focusing on 12 virtues exemplified in the quests of 12 knights from the court of Gloriana, the Faerie Queene, a symbol for Elizabeth herself. Arthur, in quest of Gloriana’s love, would appear in each book and come to exemplify Magnificence, the complete man. Spenser took the decorative chivalry of the Elizabethan court festivals and reworked it through a constantly shifting veil of allegory, so that the knights’ adventures and loves build into a complex, multileveled portrayal of the moral life. The verse, a spacious and slow-moving nine-lined stanza, and archaic language frequently rise to an unrivaled sensuousness.

The Faerie Queene was a public poem, addressed to the queen, and politically it echoed the hopes of the Leicester circle for government motivated by godliness and militancy. Spenser’s increasing disillusion with the court and with the active life, a disillusion noticeable in the poem’s later books and in his bitter satire *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (1591), voiced the fading of these expectations in the last decade of Elizabeth’s reign, the beginning of that remarkable failure of political and cultural confidence in the monarchy. In the “Mutability Cantos,” melancholy fragments of a projected seventh book (published posthumously in 1609), Spenser turned away from the public world altogether, toward the ambiguous consolations of eternity.

The lessons taught by Sidney and Spenser in the cultivation of melodic smoothness and graceful refinement appear to good effect in the subsequent virtuoso outpouring of lyrics and sonnets. These are among the most engaging achievements of the age, though the outpouring was itself partly a product of frustration, as a generation trained to expect office or preferment but faced with courtly parsimony channeled its energies in new directions in search of patronage. For Sidney’s fellow courtiers, pastoral and love lyric were also a means of obliquely expressing one’s relationship with the queen, of advancing a proposal or an appeal.

Elizabethan lyric

Virtually every Elizabethan poet tried his hand at the lyric; few, if any, failed to write one that is not still anthologized today. The fashion for interspersing prose fiction with lyric interludes, begun in the *Arcadia*, was continued by Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge (notably in the latter’s *Rosalynde* [1590], the source for Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* [c. 1598–1600]), and in the theaters plays of every kind were diversified by songs both popular and courtly. Fine examples are in the plays of Jonson, John Lyly, George Peele, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Dekker (though all, of course, are outshone by Shakespeare’s). The most important influence on lyric poetry, though, was the outstanding richness of late Tudor and Jacobean music, in both the native tradition of expressive lute song, represented by John Dowland and Robert Johnson, and the complex Italianate madrigal newly imported by William Byrd and Thomas Morley. The foremost talent among lyricists, Thomas Campion, was a composer as well as a poet; his songs (four *Books of Airs*, 1601–17) are unsurpassed for their clarity, harmoniousness, and rhythmic subtlety. Even the work of a lesser talent, however, such as Nicholas Breton, is remarkable for the suggestion of depth and poise in the slightest performances; the smoothness and apparent spontaneity of the Elizabethan lyric conceal a consciously ordered and labored artifice, attentive to decorum and rhetorical fitness. These are not personal but public pieces, intended for singing and governed by a Neoplatonic aesthetic in which delight is a means of addressing the moral sense, harmonizing and attuning the auditor's mind to the discipline of reason and virtue. This necessitates a deliberate narrowing of scope—to the readily comprehensible situations of pastoral or Petrarchan hope and despair—and makes for a certain uniformity of effect, albeit an agreeable one. The lesser talents are well displayed in the miscellanies *The Phoenix Nest* (1593), *England's Helicon* (1600), and *A Poetical Rhapsody* (1602).

The sonnet sequence

The publication of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* in 1591 generated an equally extraordinary vogue for the sonnet sequence, Sidney's principal imitators being Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, Fulke Greville, Spenser, and Shakespeare; his lesser imitators were Henry Constable, Barnabe Barnes, Giles Fletcher the Elder, Lodge, Richard Barnfield, and many more. *Astrophel* had re-created the Petrarchan world of proud beauty and despairing lover in a single, brilliant stroke, though in English hands the preferred division of the sonnet into three quatrains and a couplet gave Petrarch's contemplative form a more forensic turn, investing it with an argumentative terseness and epigrammatic sting. Within the common ground shared by the sequences, there is much diversity. Only Sidney's sequence endeavors to tell a story, the others being more loosely organized as variations focusing on a central (usually fictional) relationship. Daniel's *Delia* (1592) is eloquent and elegant, dignified and high-minded; Drayton's *Ideas Mirror* (1594; much revised by 1619) rises to a strongly imagined, passionate intensity; Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) celebrates, unusually, fulfilled sexual love achieved within marriage. Shakespeare's sonnets (published 1609) present a different world altogether, the conventions upside down, the lady no beauty but dark and treacherous, the loved one beyond considerations of sexual possession because he is male. The sonnet tended to gravitate toward correctness or politeness, and for most readers its chief pleasure must have been rhetorical, in its forceful pleading and consciously exhibited artifice, but, under the pressure of Shakespeare's urgent metaphysical concerns, dramatic toughness, and shifting and highly charged ironies, the form's conventional limits were exploded.

Other poetic styles

Sonnet and lyric represent one tradition of verse within the period, that most conventionally delineated as Elizabethan, but the picture is complicated by the coexistence of other poetic styles in which ornament was distrusted or turned to different purposes; the sonnet was even parodied by Sir John Davies in his *Gulling Sonnets* (c. 1594) and by the Jesuit poet Robert Southwell. A particular stimulus to experiment was the variety of new possibilities made available by verse translation, from Richard Stanyhurst's extraordinary *Aeneid* (1582), in quantitative hexameter and littered with obscure or invented diction, and Sir John Harington's version of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1591), with its Byronic ease and narrative fluency, to Christopher Marlowe's blank verse rendering of *Lucan's First Book* (published 1600), probably the finest Elizabethan translation.

The genre to benefit most from translation was the epyllion, or little epic. This short narrative in verse was usually on a mythological subject, taking most of its material from Ovid, either his *Metamorphoses* (English version by Arthur Golding, 1565–67) or his *Heroides* (English version by Turberville, 1567). This form flourished from Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589) to Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* (1602) and is best represented by Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (published 1598) and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593). Ovid's reputation as an esoteric philosopher left its mark on George Chapman's *Ovid's Banquet of Sense* (1595) and Drayton's *Endimion and Phoebe* (1595), in which the love of mortal for goddess becomes a parable of wisdom. But Ovid's real attraction was as an authority on the erotic, and most epyllia treat physical love with sophistication and sympathy, unrelieved by the gloss of allegory—a tendency culminating in John Marston's *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image* (1598), a poem that has shocked tender sensibilities. Inevitably, the shift of attitude had an effect on style: for Marlowe the experience of translating (inaccurately) Ovid's *Amores* meant a gain for *Hero and Leander* in terms of urbanity and, more important, wit.

With the epyllion comes a hint of the tastes of the following reign, and a similar shift of taste can be felt among those poets of the 1590s who began to modify the ornamental style in the direction of native plainness or Classical restraint. An astute courtier such as Davies might, in his *Orchestra* (1596) and *Hymns of Astraea* (1599), write confident panegyrics to the aging Elizabeth, but in Sir Walter Raleigh's "Eleventh Book of the Ocean to Cynthia," a kind of broken pastoral eclogue, praise of the queen is undermined by an obscure but eloquent sense of hopelessness and disillusionment. For Raleigh, the complimental manner seems to be disintegrating under the weight of disgrace and isolation at court; his scattered lyrics—notably "The Lie," a contemptuous dismissal of the court—often draw their resonance from the resources of the plain style. Another courtier whose writing suggests similar pressures is Greville. His *Caelica* (published 1633) begins as a conventional sonnet sequence but gradually abandons Neoplatonism for pessimistic reflections on religion and politics. Other works in his sinewy and demanding verse include philosophical treatises and unperformed melodramas (*Alaham* and *Mustapha*) that have a somber Calvinist tone, presenting man as a vulnerable creature inhabiting a world of unresolved contradictions:

> Oh wearisome condition of humanity!
> Born under one law, to another bound;
> Vainly begot, and yet forbidden vanity,
> Created sick, commanded to be sound.
>
> (*Mustapha*, chorus)

Greville was a friend of Robert Devereux, 2nd earl of Essex, whose revolt against Elizabeth ended in 1601 on the scaffold, and other poets on the edge of the Essex circle fueled the taste for aristocratic heroism and individualist ethics. Chapman's masterpiece, his translation of Homer (1598), is dedicated to Essex, and his original poems are intellectual and recondite, often deliberately difficult and obscure; his abstruseness is a means of restricting his audience to a worthy, understanding elite. Daniel, in his verse *Epistles* (1603) written to various noblemen, strikes a mean between plainness and compliment; his *Musophilus* (1599), dedicated to Greville, defends the worth of poetry but says there are too many frivolous wits writing. The cast of Daniel's mind is stoical, and his language is classically precise. His major project was a verse history of *The Civil Wars Between the Two Houses of Lancaster and York* (1595–1609), and versified history is also strongly represented in Drayton's *Legends* (1593–1607), *Barons' Wars* (1596, 1603), and *England's Heroical Epistles* (1597).

The form that really set its face against Elizabethan politeness was the satire. Satire was related to the complaint, of which there were notable examples by Daniel (*The Complaint of Rosamond*, 1592) and Shakespeare (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 1594) that are dignified and tragic laments in supple verse. But the Elizabethans mistakenly held the term *satire* to derive from the Greek *satyros*, a satyr, and so set out to match their manner to their matter and make their verses snarl. In the works of the principal satirists, Donne (five satires, 1593–98), Joseph Hall (*Virgidemiarum*, 1597–98), and Marston (*Certain Satires* and *The Scourge of Villainy*, 1598), the denunciation of vice and folly repeatedly tips into invective, raillery, and sheer abuse. The versification of Donne's satires is frequently so rough as barely to be verse at all; Hall apologized for not being harsh enough, and Marston was himself pilloried in Jonson's play *Poetaster* (1601) for using ridiculously difficult language. "Vex all the world," wrote Marston to himself, "so that thyself be pleased." The satirists popularized a new persona, that of the malcontent who denounces his society not from above but from within. Their continuing attraction resides in their self-contradictory delight in the world they profess to abhor and their evident fascination with the minutiae of life in court and city. They were enthusiastically followed by Everard Guilpin, Samuel Rowlands, Thomas Middleton, and Cyril Tourneur, and so scandalous was the flood of satires that in 1599 their printing was banned. Thereafter the form survived in Jonson's classically balanced epigrams and poems of the good life, but its more immediate impact was on the drama, in helping to create the vigorously skeptical voices that people *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1599–1601).

Prose styles, 1550–1600

Prose was easily the principal medium in the Elizabethan period, and, despite the mid-century uncertainties over the language's weaknesses and strengths—whether coined and imported words should be admitted; whether the structural modeling of English prose on Latin writing was beneficial or, as Bacon would complain, a pursuit of "choiceness of phrase" at the expense of "soundness of argument"—the general attainment of prose writing was uniformly high, as is often manifested in contexts not conventionally imaginative or "literary," such as tracts, pamphlets, and treatises. The obvious instance of such casual success is Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589; expanded 1598–1600), a massive collection of travelers' tales, of which some are highly accomplished narratives. William Harrison's gossipy, entertaining *Description of England* (1577), Philip Stubbes's excitable and humane social critique *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), Reginald Scot's anecdotal *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), and John Stow's invaluable *Survey of London* (1598) also deserve passing mention. William Kempe's account of his morris dance from London to Norwich, *Kempe's Nine Days' Wonder* (1600), exemplifies a smaller genre, the newsbook (a type of pamphlet).

The writers listed above all use an unpretentious style, enlivened with a vivid vocabulary; the early prose fiction, on the other hand, delights in ingenious formal embellishment at the expense of narrative economy. This runs up against preferences ingrained in the modern reader by the novel, but Elizabethan fiction is not at all novelistic and finds room for debate, song, and the conscious elaboration of style. The unique exception is Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F.J.* (1573), a tale of thwarted love set in an English great house, which is the first success in English imaginative prose. Gascoigne's story has a surprising authenticity and almost psychological realism (it may be autobiographical), but even so it is heavily imbued with the influence of Castiglione.

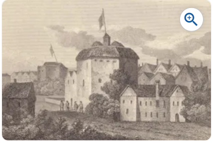
The existence of an audience for polite fiction was signaled in the collections of stories imported from France and Italy by William Painter (1566), Geoffrey Fenton (1577), and George Pettie (1576). Pettie, who claimed not to care "to displease twenty men to please one woman," believed his readership was substantially female. There were later collections by Barnaby Rich (1581) and George Whetstone (1583); historically, their importance was as sources of plots for many Elizabethan plays. The direction fiction was to take was established by John Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), which, with its sequel *Euphues and His England* (1580), set a fashion for an extreme rhetorical mannerism that came to be known as euphuism. The plot of *Euphues*—a rake's fall from virtue and his recovery—is but an excuse for a series of debates, letters, and speechifyings, thick with assonance, antithesis, parallelism, and balance and displaying a pseudoscientific learning. Lyly's style would be successful on the stage, but in fiction its density and monotony are wearying. The other major prose work of the 1570s, Sidney's *Arcadia*, is no less rhetorical (Abraham Fraunce illustrated his handbook of style *The Arcadian Rhetoric* [1588] almost entirely with examples from the *Arcadia*), but with Sidney rhetoric is in the service of psychological insight and an exciting plot. Dozens of imitations of *Arcadia* and *Euphues* followed from the pens of Greene, Lodge, Anthony Munday, Emanuel Forde, and others; none has much distinction.

Prose was to be decisively transformed through its involvement in the bitter and learned controversies of the 1570s and '80s over the reform of the English Church and the problems the controversies raised in matters of authority, obedience, and conscience. The fragile ecclesiastical compromise threatened to collapse under the demands for further reformation made by Elizabeth's more godly subjects, and its defense culminated in Richard Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (eight books, 1593–1662), the first English classic of serious prose. Hooker's is a monumental work, structured in massive and complex paragraphs brilliantly re-creating the orotund style of Cicero. His air of maturity and detachment has recommended him to modern tastes, but no more than his opponents was he above the cut and thrust of controversy. On the contrary, his magisterial rhetoric was designed all the more effectively to fix blame onto his enemies, and even his account (in Books VI–VIII) of the relationship of church and state was deemed too sensitive for publication in the 1590s.

More decisive for English fiction was the appearance of the "Martin Marprelate" tracts of 1588–90. These seven pamphlets argued the Puritan case but with an un-Puritanical scurrility and created great scandal by hurling invective and abuse at Elizabeth's bishops with comical gusto. The bishops employed Lyly and Nashe to reply to the pseudonymous Marprelate, and the consequence may be read in Nashe's prose satires of the following decade, especially *Piers Penniless His Supplication to the Devil* (1592), *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), and *Nashe's Lenten Stuff* (1599), the latter a pamphlet in praise of herring. Nashe's "extemporal vein" makes fullest use of the flexibility of colloquial speech and delights in nonsense, redundancy, and disconcerting shifts of tone, which demand an answering agility from the reader. His language is probably the most profusely inventive of all Elizabethan writers', and he makes even Greene's low-life pamphlets (1591–92), with their sensational tales from the underworld, look conventional. His only rival is Thomas Deloney, whose *Jack of Newbury* (1597), *The Gentle Craft* (1597–98), and *Thomas of Reading* (1600) are enduringly attractive for their depiction of the lives of ordinary citizens, interspersed with elements of romance, jest book, and folktale. Deloney's entirely convincing dialogue indicates how important for the development of a flexible prose must have been the example of a flourishing theater in Elizabethan London. In this respect, as in so many others, the role of the drama was crucial.

Elizabethan and early Stuart drama

Theater and society

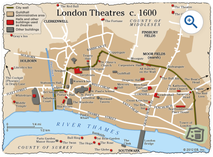


Engraving of the Globe Theatre Globe Theatre, enlarged 19th-century copy of a 1612 engraving.

In the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, the theater was the focal point of the age. Public life was shot through with theatricality—monarchs ruled with ostentatious pageantry, rank and status were defined in a rigid code of dress—while on the stages the tensions and contradictions working to change the nation were embodied and played out. More than any other form, the drama addressed itself to the total experience of its society. Playgoing was inexpensive, and the playhouse yards were thronged with apprentices, fishwives, laborers, and the like, but the same play that was performed to citizen spectators in the afternoon would often be restaged at court by night. The drama's power to activate complex, multiple perspectives on a single issue or event resides in its sensitivity to the competing prejudices and sympathies of this diverse audience.

Moreover, the theater was fully responsive to the developing technical sophistication of nondramatic literature. In the hands of Shakespeare, the blank verse employed for translation by the earl of Surrey in the first half of the 16th century became a medium infinitely mobile between extremes of formality and intimacy, while prose encompassed both the control of Hooker and the immediacy of Nashe. This was above all a spoken drama, glorying in the theatrical energies of language. And the stage was able to attract the most technically accomplished writers of its day because it offered, uniquely, a literary career with some realistic prospect of financial return. The decisive event was the opening of the Theatre, considered the first purpose-built London playhouse, in 1576, and during the next 70 years some 20 theaters more are known to have operated. The quantity and diversity of plays they commissioned are little short of astonishing.

Theatres in London and the provinces

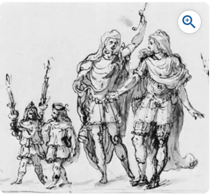


Map of London's theaters c. 1600 London theaters (c. 1600).

The London theaters were a meeting ground of humanism and popular taste. They inherited, on the one hand, a tradition of humanistic drama current at court, the universities, and the Inns of Court (collegiate institutions responsible for legal education). This tradition involved the revival of Classical plays and attempts to adapt Latin conventions to English, particularly to reproduce the type of tragedy, with its choruses, ghosts, and sententiously formal verse, associated with Seneca (10 tragedies by Seneca in English translation appeared in 1581). A fine example of the type is *Gorboduc* (1561), by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, a tragedy based on British chronicle history that draws for Elizabeth's benefit a grave political moral about irresponsible government. It is also the earliest known English play in blank verse. On the other hand, all the professional companies performing in London continued also to tour in the provinces, and the stage was never allowed to lose contact with its roots in country show, pastime, and festival. The simple moral scheme that pitted virtues against vices in the mid-Tudor interlude was never entirely submerged in more sophisticated drama, and the Vice, the tricksy villain of the morality play, survives, in infinitely more amusing and terrifying form, in Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592–94).

Another survival was the clown or the fool, apt at any moment to step beyond the play's illusion and share jokes directly with the spectators. The intermingling of traditions is clear in two farces, Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553) and the anonymous *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1559), in which academic pastiche is overlaid with country game; and what the popular tradition did for tragedy is indicated in Thomas Preston's *Cambises, King of Persia* (c. 1560), a blood-and-thunder tyrant play with plenty of energetic spectacle and comedy.

A third tradition was that of revelry and masques, practiced at the princely courts across Europe and preserved in England in the witty and impudent productions of the schoolboy troupes of choristers who sometimes played in London alongside the professionals. An early play related to this kind is the first English prose comedy, Gascoigne's *Supposes* (1566), translated from a reveling play in Italian. Courtly revel reached its apogee in England in the ruinously expensive court masques staged for James I and Charles I, magnificent displays of song, dance, and changing scenery performed before a tiny aristocratic audience and glorifying the king. The principal masque writer was Ben Jonson, the scene designer Inigo Jones.



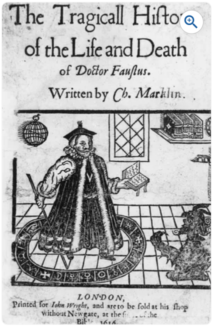
Design by Inigo Jones for a procession in *The Masque of Augures* Detail of a design by Inigo Jones for a procession in *The*...(more)

Professional playwrights

The first generation of professional playwrights in England has become known collectively as the university wits. Their nickname identifies their social pretensions, but their drama was primarily middle class, patriotic, and romantic. Their preferred subjects were historical or pseudo-historical, mixed with clowning, music, and love interest. At times, plot virtually evaporated; George Peele's *Old Wives' Tale* (c. 1595) and Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1600) are simply popular shows, charming medleys of comic turns, spectacle, and song. Peele was a civic poet, and his serious plays are bold and pageantlike; *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584) is a pastoral entertainment, designed to compliment Elizabeth. Greene's speciality was comical histories, interweaving a serious plot set among kings with comic action involving clowns. In his *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) and *James IV* (1598), the antics of vulgar characters complement but also criticize the follies of their betters. Only Lyly, writing for the choristers, endeavored to achieve a courtly refinement. His *Gallathea* (1584) and *Endimion* (1591) are fantastic comedies in which courtiers, nymphs, and goddesses make rarefied love in intricate, artificial patterns, the very stuff of courtly dreaming.

Marlowe

Outshining all these is Christopher Marlowe, who alone realized the tragic potential inherent in the popular style, with its bombast and extravagance. His heroes are men of towering ambition who speak blank verse of unprecedented (and occasionally monotonous) elevation, their "high astounding terms" embodying the challenge that they pose to the orthodox values of the societies they disrupt. In *Tamburlaine the Great* (two parts, published 1590) and *Edward II* (c. 1591; published 1594), traditional political orders are overwhelmed by conquerors and politicians who ignore the boasted legitimacy of weak kings; *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589; published 1633) studies the man of business whose financial acumen and trickery give him unrestrained power; *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (c. 1593; published 1604) depicts the overthrow of a man whose learning shows scant regard for God. The main focus of all these plays is on the uselessness of society's moral and religious sanctions against



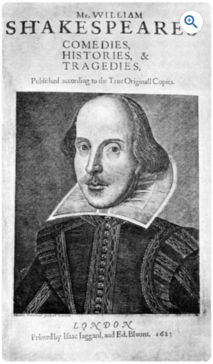
The Tragicall Hiſto
of the Life and Death
of Doctor Fauſtus.
Written by Ch. Marklin.

LONDON,
Printed for Iohn Wright, and are to be ſold at his ſhop
without Newgate, at the ſi... of the
Bi... 1616.

Title page of the 1616 edition of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* Faust, detail fr...(more)

pragmatic, amoral will. They patently address themselves to the anxieties of an age being transformed by new forces in politics, commerce, and science; indeed, the sinister, ironic prologue to *The Jew of Malta* is spoken by Machiavelli. In his own time Marlowe was damned as atheist, homosexual, and libertine, and his plays remain disturbing because his verse makes theatrical presence into the expression of power, enlisting the spectators' sympathies on the side of his gigantic villain-heroes. His plays thus present the spectator with dilemmas that can be neither resolved nor ignored, and they articulate exactly the divided consciousness of their time. There is a similar effect in *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1591) by Marlowe's friend Thomas Kyd, an early revenge tragedy in which the hero seeks justice for the loss of his son but, in an unjust world, can achieve it only by taking the law into his own hands. Kyd's use of Senecan conventions (notably a ghost impatient for revenge) in a Christian setting expresses a genuine conflict of values, making the hero's success at once triumphant and horrifying.

Shakespeare's works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LONDON
Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed. Blount. 1623

Shakespeare's First Folio Title page of the First Folio, the first published edition (1623) of the collected works of William... ...(more)

Above all other dramatists stands William Shakespeare, a supreme genius whom it is impossible to characterize briefly. Shakespeare is unequaled as poet and intellect, but he remains elusive. His capacity for assimilation—what the poet John Keats called his "negative capability"—means that his work is comprehensively accommodating; every attitude or ideology finds its resemblance there yet also finds itself subject to criticism and interrogation. In part, Shakespeare achieved this by the total inclusiveness of his aesthetic, by putting clowns in his tragedies and kings in his comedies, juxtaposing public and private, and mingling the artful with the spontaneous; his plays imitate the counterchange of values occurring at large in his society. The sureness and profound popularity of his taste enabled him to lead the English Renaissance without privileging or prejudicing any one of its divergent aspects, while he—as actor, dramatist, and shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's players—was involved in the Elizabethan theater at every level. His career (dated from 1589 to 1613) corresponded exactly to the period of greatest literary flourishing, and only in his work are the total possibilities of the Renaissance fully realized.

The early histories

1 of 2

0:00 / 1:59

***Henry V*: John Gielgud** Henry V rallying his comrades-in-arms, "Once more unto the breach,...(more)

Shakespeare's early plays were principally histories and comedies. About a fifth of all Elizabethan plays were histories, but this was the genre that Shakespeare particularly made his own, dramatizing the whole sweep of English history from Richard II to Henry VII in two four-play sequences, an astonishing project carried off with triumphant success. The first sequence, comprising the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* (1589–94), begins as a patriotic celebration of English valor against the French. But this is soon superseded by a mature, disillusioned understanding of the world of politics, culminating in the devastating portrayal of Richard III—probably the first "character," in the modern sense, on the English stage—who boasts in *Henry VI, Part 3* that he can "set the murtherous Machevil to school." *Richard III* ostensibly monumentalizes the glorious accession of the dynasty of Tudor, but its realistic depiction of the workings of state power insidiously undercuts such platitudes, and the appeal of Richard's quick-witted individuality is deeply unsettling, short-circuiting any easy moral judgments. The second sequence—*Richard II* (1595–96), *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Part 2* (1596–98), and *Henry V* (1599)—begins with the deposing of a bad but legitimate king and follows its consequences through two generations, probing relentlessly at the difficult questions of authority, obedience, and order that it raises. (The earl of Essex's faction paid for a performance of *Richard II* on the eve of their ill-fated rebellion against Elizabeth in 1601.) In the *Henry IV* plays, which are dominated by the massive character of Falstaff and his roguish exploits in Eastcheap, Shakespeare intercuts scenes among the rulers with scenes among those who are ruled, thus creating a multifaceted composite picture of national life at a particular historical moment. The tone of these plays, though, is increasingly pessimistic, and in *Henry V* a patriotic fantasy of English greatness is hedged around with hesitations and qualifications about the validity of the myth of glorious nationhood offered by the Agincourt story. Through all these plays runs a concern for the individual and his subjection to historical and political necessity, a concern that is essentially tragic and anticipates greater plays yet to come. Shakespeare's other history plays, *King John* (1594–96) and *Henry VIII* (1613), approach similar questions through material drawn from Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*.

The early comedies

0:00 / 2:25

***As You Like It*: John Gielgud** Jaques philosophizes “All the world's a stage” (*As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7, line 138),.....(more)

The early comedies share the popular and romantic forms used by the university wits but overlay them with elements of elegant courtly revel and a sophisticated consciousness of comedy's fragility and artifice. These are festive comedies, giving access to a society vigorously and imaginatively at play. The plays of one group—*The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1589–94), *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1589–94), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1597–98), and *Twelfth Night* (1600–01)—are comedies of intrigue, fast-moving, often farcical, and placing a high premium on wit. The plays of a second group—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1589–94), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1589–94), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595–96), and *As You Like It* (1598–1600)—have as a common denominator a journey to a natural environment, such as a wood or a park, in which the restraints governing everyday life are released and the characters are free to remake themselves untrammeled by society's forms, sportiveness providing a space in which the fragmented individual may recover wholeness. All the comedies share a belief in the positive, health-giving powers of play, but none is completely innocent of doubts about the limits that encroach upon the comic space. In the four plays that approach tragicomedy—*The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596–97), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598–99), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1601–05), and *Measure for Measure* (1603–04)—festivity is in direct collision with the constraints of normality, with time, business, law, human indifference, treachery, and selfishness. These plays give greater weight to the less-optimistic perspectives on society current in the 1590s, and their comic resolutions are openly acknowledged to be only provisional, brought about by manipulation, compromise, or the exclusion of one or more major characters. The unique play *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601–02) presents a kind of theatrical no-man's-land between comedy and tragedy, between satire and savage farce. Shakespeare's reworking of the Trojan War pits heroism against its parody in a way that voices fully the fin-de-siècle sense of confused and divided individuality.

The tragedies

Learn about the characters of *Othello* as discussed by the cast and crew of a Folger Shakespeare Library production Wi..(more)

See all videos for this article

The confusions and contradictions of Shakespeare's age find their highest expression in his tragedies. In these extraordinary achievements, all values, hierarchies, and forms are tested and found wanting, and all society's latent conflicts are activated. Shakespeare sets husband against wife, father against child, the individual against society; he uncrowns kings, levels the nobleman with the beggar, and interrogates the gods. Already in the early experimental tragedies *Titus Andronicus* (1589–94), with its spectacular violence, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1594–96), with its comedy and romantic tale of adolescent love, Shakespeare had broken away from the conventional Elizabethan understanding of tragedy as a twist of fortune to an infinitely more complex investigation of character and motive, and in *Julius Caesar* (1599) he begins to turn the political interests of the history plays into secular and corporate tragedy, as men fall victim to the unstoppable train of public events set in motion by their private misjudgments. In the major tragedies that follow, Shakespeare's practice cannot be confined to a single general statement that covers all cases, for each tragedy belongs to a separate category: revenge tragedy in *Hamlet* (c. 1599–1601), domestic tragedy in *Othello* (1603–04), social tragedy in *King Lear* (1605–06), political tragedy in *Macbeth* (1606–07), and heroic tragedy in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–07). In each category Shakespeare's play is exemplary and defines its type; the range and brilliance of this achievement are staggering. The worlds of Shakespeare's heroes are collapsing around them, and their desperate attempts to cope with the collapse uncover the inadequacy of the systems by which they rationalize their sufferings and justify their existence. The ultimate insight is Lear's irremediable grief over his dead daughter: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?" Before the overwhelming suffering of these great and noble spirits, all consolations are void, and all versions of order stand revealed as adventitious. The humanism of the Renaissance is punctured in the very moment of its greatest single product.

Shakespeare's later works

In his last period Shakespeare's astonishingly fertile invention returned to experimentation. In *Coriolanus* (1608) he completed his political tragedies, drawing a dispassionate analysis of the dynamics of the secular state; in the scene of the Roman food riot (not unsympathetically depicted) that opens the play is echoed the Warwickshire enclosure riots of 1607. *Timon of Athens* (1605–08) is an unfinished spin-off, a kind of tragic satire. The last group of plays comprises the four romances—*Pericles* (c. 1606–08), *Cymbeline* (c. 1608–10), *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609–11), and *The Tempest* (1611)—which develop a long, philosophical perspective on fortune and suffering. (Another work, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* [1613–14], was written in collaboration with John Fletcher, as perhaps was a play known as *Cardenio* [1613, now lost].) In these plays Shakespeare's imagination returns to the popular romances of his youth and dwells on mythical themes—wanderings, shipwrecks, the reunion of sundered families, and the resurrection of people long thought dead. There is consolation here, of a sort, beautiful and poetic, but still the romances do not turn aside from the actuality of suffering, chance, loss, and unkindness, and Shakespeare's subsidiary theme is a sustained examination of the nature of his own art, which alone makes these consolations possible. Even in this unearthly context a subtle interchange is maintained between the artist's delight in his illusion and his mature awareness of his own disillusionment.

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